25 Greatest Travel Books of All Time

From the bustling streets of Brooklyn to the empty expanse of the Sahara, our guide to the best travel reads of all time will inspire you to add a few new places to your to-go list.

By Ian Crouch

June 8, 2011

http://www.budgettravel.com/feature/the-25-greatest-travel-books-of-all-time,7357/

Just what is travel writing? Sometimes it tells the story of a journey—the initial excitement of a ship leaving port or the joy of watching the sun rise in a brand-new place. Often it celebrates the act of exploration itself—poking around, asking questions, getting lost and into scrapes, making all the mistakes of the newcomer. But most essentially, it should prompt us to look longingly at our suitcases, start thinking about that next week off, and begin planning adventures of our own.

This is the spirit that animates the books on our list—Budget Travel's first ever roundup of the greatest travel literature. Despite their differences in genre and style, these books all give an unforgettable sense of place—whether that place is a small patch of ground, an entire continent, or just the wrinkles of the writer's mind.

FICTION

On the Road, by Jack Kerouac (1957)

Kerouac didn't invent America's obsession with the open road, but he did capture the complexities of our collective drive West in a uniquely deep and enduring way. The travels of Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise are a celebration of two of the country's greatest inventions: jazz and the roaring, big-engined automobile. Yet Kerouac persists at revealing the dark, forgotten places like skid-row San Francisco and a migrant farmworkers' camp in southern California. What draws new generations of restless young readers to the book, though, is Kerouac's exuberant prose: "...The car was swaying as Dean and I both swayed to the rhythm and the IT of our final excited joy in talking and living to the blank tranced end of all innumerable riotous angelic particulars that had been lurking in our souls all our lives."

The Sheltering Sky, by Paul Bowles (1949)

Bowles was a composer, translator, and the author of many books, including the travel narrative Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue, a collection of beautiful and highly personal essays on the places he traveled, from Ceylon to Morocco. But this is his finest achievement, in which an American couple and their male friend explore the kasbahs of North Africa before embarking on an ill-considered trip to the Sahara. Bowles captures the stark, alien nature of the landscape: "Here in the desert, even more than at sea, she had the impression that she was on the top of a great table, that the horizon was the brink of space." Yet for all its beautiful prose, this book is as much a warning as it is a beckoning to explore; it uncovers the dark side of travel—how a series of minor mistakes, caused by willfulness and ignorance, can have deadly consequences.

The Beach, by Alex Garland (1996)

Garland's sly page-turner about an unorthodox, supersecret community of expat island-dwellers in Southeast Asia navigates a remarkable middle ground, at once celebrating the spirit of exploration that

inspires the backpacker set and satirizing the ad-hoc culture based on drugs, tans, and pseudo-enlightenment that these young people seek. Despite Garland's suspicion of the Goa and Phuket faithful, few writers have described so well the thrill of a cliff dive, the joys of Tetris on a Game Boy, or the beguiling beauty of a tropical sunset—and inspired armchair travelers to embark on the real thing in the process: "If I'd learned one thing from traveling, it was that the way to get things done was to go ahead and do them. Don't talk about going to Borneo. Book a ticket, get a visa, pack a bag, and it just happens."

Daughter of Fortune, by Isabel Allende (1999)
This exhaustively researched novel follows two fascinating characters, Eliza Sommers, an orphan adopted by an English brother and sister, and Tao Chi'en, her Chinese physician, as they are drawn into a mysterious adventure in California during the 1848 Gold Rush. Allende is a master of the street scene; her description of boomtown San Francisco, with its surging crowds of fortune-hunters from around the world, would spark the imagination of any traveler who has ventured into an unknown city for the first time: "The heterogeneous throng pulsed with frenzied activity, pushing, bumping into building materials, barrels, boxes, burros, and carts."

White Teeth, by Zadie Smith (2000)
This riotous and deeply felt novel opens with the inscription "What is past is prologue." Yet for Smith's characters, who make up several families across three generations in London, that past is always present, in the form of skin color, religion, and improvised traditions that connect to far-off places like Jamaica and Bangladesh. Smith writes: "Because this is the other thing about immigrants...they cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow." The confluence of cultures in modern England is explored in dozens of subplots, including uproar over a nondenominational school festival that manages to offend members of every faith—Christian, Muslim, and Jewish—that are represented in the novel.

A Passage to India, by E. M. Forster (1924)
This is the seminal clash-of-cultures novel in English, a reminder that the most essential experiences of travel are not the sights, sounds, or smells that one encounters in a new place—all of which Forster observes with a keen eye—but the possibilities and limitations of human connection, explored here in the fragile friendship between the visiting Englishman Cyril Fielding and Dr. Aziz, an Indian Muslim accused of assaulting a British woman. This deeply moral book is a searing critique of colonialism—a story that reveals the startling similarities between love and hate.

The Talented Mr. Ripley, by Patricia Highsmith (1955)
Americans have always seen Europe as an aspirational place. For Tom Ripley, though, a free trip to Italy provides the perfect chance to better himself—by killing the object of his obsession, the shipbuilding heir Dickie Greenleaf, and taking on his enviable identity. Ripley haunts the streets of Rome and Venice, and Highsmith conjures a vision of the sun-bleached southern Italian shore that fills the dreams of pasty citizens of the world's cold-weather towns: "Now and then he caught glimpses of little villages down at the water's edge, houses like white crumbs of bread, specks that were the heads of people swimming near the shore."

Open City, by Teju Cole (2011)
We learn the most about a city by walking its streets, studying not its monuments and notable attractions, but the habits of its residents and the particulars of their neighborhoods. Julius, a young psychiatry resident from Nigeria, begins touring New York City on foot, for reasons he never quite explains. (He also makes a short trip to Belgium, where he similarly wanders.) What he sees and shares are startlingly original descriptions of contemporary New York; in Cole's debut novel—released in February 2011—familiar locations, such as the Hudson River, Wall Street, and Ground Zero, are made new again.

The Historian, by Elizabeth Kostova (2005)
Kostova's wildly successful debut novel manages to fuse a vampire-thriller narrative with meditations on the darker parts of European history. It follows several generations of scholars on a search for Dracula that spans the Continent, from Amsterdam to Istanbul, with stops in Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and France. (The action even extends to the U.S., with a chilling final scene in Philadelphia.) All the city-hopping is intriguing, but the most exciting voyages are the Poe-like trips into foreboding and musty monasteries, libraries, and crypts, one of which causes a character to confess: "...I could see only the shadow into which we would have to descend, and my heart shrank inside me."

Cloud Atlas, by David Mitchell (2004)
Mitchell stretches travel to its most imaginative bounds. Few novels cover this much ground, either in time or space—from places such as the South Pacific Ocean in the mid-1800s to a composer's study in 1931 Belgium to modern-day Britain to a futuristic, apocalyptic Hawaii. And few novels are so intricately structured, with stories nested within one another sharing hidden details. Yet for all its postmodern pyrotechnics, the book is constantly gripping, leading the reader on an unforgettable voyage. As one of Mitchell's characters says, in one of the various dialects that fills these pages, "... there ain't no journey what don't change you some."

The Plumed Serpent, by D. H. Lawrence (1926)
This strange and unsettling novel is as much about Lawrence's late-career preoccupations as it is about Mexico—but we sometimes benefit when a tour is as much about the guide as it is about the place. During the Mexican Revolution, an Irish widow, Kate Leslie, leaves her friends at a bullfight in Mexico City and gets caught up with a pair of charismatic rebels, who soon ensnare her in a pagan cult, dedicated to the god Quetzalcoatl, which devolves into a frightening mix of violence and sexual obsession. Despite her fear of the country around her, she nonetheless feels the pull of the place: "...there was still a strange beam of wonder and mystery, almost like hope. A strange darkly-iridescent beam of wonder, of magic."

Brooklyn, by Colm Tóibín (2009)
Emigration is often told as a one-way journey; the brilliance of this novel about Eilis Lacey—a young woman whose family encourages her to leave Ireland in the 1950s for New York City—is that it dramatizes the competing allure of old and new places. Mid-century Brooklyn is a world of vibrant, changing neighborhoods, boardinghouses, and weekend dances—all of which Lacey describes in varnished letters home. Yet it is also a place of exile. When events pull her back to Ireland, Lacey must

choose whether to stay or to return and honor her new obligations in America. Late in the novel, she tells her mother, "I'd rather say goodbye now and only once." Such clean breaks are rarely possible.

The Sun Also Rises, by Ernest Hemingway (1926)
"I mistrust all frank and simple people, especially when their stories hold together," says Hemingway's narrator Jake Barnes, yet this remarkable novel about Americans abroad following World War I manages to be frank without ever being simple, and its stories are expertly held together. These scenes of Europe are among Hemingway's most indelible: drinking Pernod in Paris cafes, fishing in a mountain stream in the Pyrenees—a bottle of white wine tucked in a nearby spring to chill—and finally on to Pamplona, where Barnes momentarily escapes his grief while marveling at the exploits of a bullfighter: "Romero's bull-fighting gave real emotion, because he kept the absolute purity of line in his movements and always quietly and calmly let the horns pass him close each time."

NONFICTION
In a Sunburned Country, by Bill Bryson (2000)
"I was standing there with a map of Australia, surveying the emptiness and trying to conceive the ungraspable fact that if I walked north from here I wouldn't come to a paved surface for eleven hundred miles," Bryson writes. This funny and insightful book eloquently captures a country often obscured by the stereotypes fueled by all those Foster's beer ads. Along with the curious geography and terrifying fauna—snakes, sharks, and crocs—Bryson captures the spirit of a uniquely sporting people, who excel at games ranging from cricket to Australian Rules football: "It is a wonder in such a vigorous and active society that there is anyone left to form an audience."

Video Night in Kathmandu, by Pico Iyer (1988)
Much has changed in Southeast Asia, but—more than 20 years after its publication—Iyer's snapshots of 10 countries there remain among the best of their kind. During short visits, Iyer peeks in at the golden age of Bollywood cinema, uncovers the seedy sex-tourism explosion in Thailand, and explores Nepal's enlightenment economy: "Religion and drugs had been the country's two great cash crops for so long now that nobody really seemed to care which one was sedative and which one stimulant."

Into the Wild, by Jon Krakauer (1996)
Krakauer's two classics—Into the Wild and Into Thin Air—were published in the span of just two years. Into Thin Air—a riveting first-person retelling of a season of bad choices and disaster on Mt. Everest—drew more headlines. But it's his earlier work, which tells the mysterious story of Christopher McCandless, a recent college graduate who was found dead in the Alaskan wilderness, that lingers in the mind long after you close the book. Krakauer is sympathetic to the spirit that led McCandless to ditch his car, burn the money in his wallet, and set out for life off the grid. In a rousing section, he recalls his own [youthful] climbing adventure in Alaska, on a stark and wondrous peak called the Devils Thumb, which was both exhilarating and nearly fatal. Yet much like Werner Herzog's documentary Grizzly Man, this is a story that draws sharp lines between adventure and madness.

Travels With Charley, by John Steinbeck (1962)
Roughly 20 years after he set the Joads off to California in their jalopy, Steinbeck took to the American

roads himself, in a pickup truck he named Rocinante, after Don Quixote's horse. Since human companionship can "disturb the ecological complex of an area," his French poodle Charley stood in as his Sancho Panza. Over the course of more than 10,000 miles, the great American moralist took one final survey of his country: "I saw in their eyes something I was to see over and over in every part of the nation—a burning desire to go, to move, to get under way, anyplace, away from any Here."

Desert Solitaire, by Edward Abbey (1968)
A corollary to the roaming spirit is the desire to get to know one place supremely well. Abbey worked two seasons in the mid-fifties as a wry, tourist-phobic ranger at Arches National Park in eastern Utah, several years before the roads were paved and the hulking RVs arrived. Abbey is a gruff, no-nonsense environmentalist and a poet of the rocks, which he sees in every light, including gorgeous visions of dusk: "The sun is touching the fretted tablelands on the west. It seems to bulge a little, to expand for a moment, and then it drops—abruptly—over the edge. I listen for a long time."

Wrong About Japan, by Peter Carey (2005)
The novelist Carey and his 12-year-old son travel to Japan in search of manga and anime culture, which the son adores and the father can't quite understand. The trip doesn't bring about much enlightenment about the country—a fine writer, Carey admits to being a terrible reporter—but that's most of the fun, a reminder that even in a global age, we can still meet with impenetrable and bewildering things.

Confederates in the Attic, by Tony Horwitz (1998)
Journalist Horwitz indulges a childhood obsession with the Civil War with a project that begins as a tour of preserved battlefields but evolves into a funny and massively insightful exploration of the contemporary American South. Horwitz takes to the field with a group of hard-core reenactors, gets to the bottom of the real story behind Gone with the Wind, and examines the legacy of the war and the civil-rights movement in Selma, Alabama.

Out of Africa and Shadows on the Grass, by Isak Dinesen (1937 and 1960)
It's hard to read this memoir of life managing a coffee plantation in British East Africa (later Kenya) without hearing Meryl Streep's deep intonations or squirming at some of the dated, paternalistic descriptions of the native population. Yet Karen Blixen (who wrote under the name Isak Dinesen) held progressive racial views for her time, and turns a curious and honest eye to everything around her: the people, flora, and fauna of her beloved adopted home: "I had seen the royal lion, before sunrise, below a waning moon, crossing the grey plain on his way home from the kill, drawing a dark wake in the silvery grass and in the delicate, spring-like shade of the broad Acacia trees of his park of Africa."

The Snow Leopard, by Peter Matthiessen (1978)
Matthiessen and the biologist George Schaller, along with a small company of sherpas and porters, travel into the Himalayas in search of exotic species, including the blue sheep known as the bharal and the elusive snow leopard (and, perhaps jokingly, the even more elusive yeti). Mirroring this quest is a spiritual one that combines Matthiessen's evolving Buddhism with his grief at the death of his wife. Will they spot a leopard? Does it even matter? This is a timeless celebration of the mystical qualities of nature: "The earth twitches, and the mountains shimmer, as if all molecules had been set free: the blue

sky rings."

The Great Railway Bazaar, by Paul Theroux (1975)
Theroux persuades us that one of the best ways to discover the culture of a country is by riding its trains. The author reached nearly every corner of Asia, and just reading the names of the notable trains he rode—the Direct-Orient Express, the Khyber Pass Local, the Mandalay Express, the Golden Arrow to Kuala Lumpur, and the Trans-Siberian Express—is enough to summon visions of a kind of travel that even then was beginning to fade away.

In Patagonia, by Bruce Chatwin (1977)
Chatwin, inspired by an ancient piece of skin from the extinct mylodon (a giant sloth) that he admired as a child in England, ventures to Patagonia. The book he brought back stretches the boundaries of the travelogue genre, blending reporting, myth, outright tall tales, science, history, and linguistics to form an idiosyncratic stew. While numerous inventions and errors of fact have been discovered in the text, precision here is less valuable than the totality of Chatwin's yarn, which finds room for extended musings about Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Coleridge's Mariner, Shakespeare's Caliban, and the beauty of the place around him: "There was no sound but the wind, whirring through thorns and whistling through dead grass, and no other sign of life but a hawk, and a black beetle easing over white stones."

Great Plains, by Ian Frazier (1989)
Frazier takes us to a land of tough farming and hard living, an increasingly overlooked swath of America—running roughly from Montana to Texas—that most people only see from an airplane. Frazier always has an eye on history, but the most stirring encounters happen in the present, as when he meets a Sioux man named Le War Lance, who playfully threatens to scalp him and jeers at shoppers leaving the grocery store with bags full of such exoticisms as pasta: "He took my right wrist and pressed his thumb tightly against my pulse and then spoke a sentence. The sound of Sioux is soft and rippling, like something you might hear through a bead curtain."